

On Being 17, Bright, and Unable to Read

DAVID RAYMOND

David Raymond was born in 1959 in Connecticut. When the following article appeared in the *New York Times* in 1976, Raymond was a junior in high school. In 1981, Raymond graduated from Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts, one of the few colleges with learning-disability programs at the time. He and his family now live in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he works as a builder.

In his essay, Raymond shares his story of being language challenged in a world of readers. Even though testing revealed that Raymond had above-average intelligence, he always felt "dumb" in school. In his plea for understanding other dyslexic children, he poignantly discusses the emotionally charged difficulties his own dyslexia caused and the many problems he experienced in school as a result.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *One of the fundamental language arts skills that we are supposed to learn in school is how to read. How do you rate yourself as a reader? How dependent are you on reading in your everyday life? How would your life change if you were unable to read?*

One day a substitute teacher picked me to read aloud from the textbook. When I told her "No, thank you," she came unhinged. She thought I was acting smart, and told me so. I kept calm, and that got her madder and madder. We must have spent 10 minutes trying to solve the problem, and finally she got so red in the face I thought she'd blow up. She told me she'd see me after class.

Maybe someone like me was a new thing for that teacher. But she wasn't new to me. I've been through scenes like that all my life. You see, even though I'm 17 and a junior in high school, I can't read because I have dyslexia. I'm told I read "at a fourth-grade level," but from where I sit, that's not reading. You can't know what that means unless you've been there. It's not easy to tell how it feels when you can't read your homework assignments or the newspaper or a menu in a restaurant or even notes from your own friends.

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My family began to suspect I was having problems almost from the first day I started school. My father says my early years in school were the worst years of his life. They weren't so good for me, either. As I look back on it now, I can't find the words to express how bad it really was. I wanted to die. I'd come home from school screaming, "I'm dumb. I'm dumb—I wish I were dead!"

I guess I couldn't read anything at all then—not even my own name—and they tell me I didn't talk as good as other kids. But what I remember about those days is that I couldn't throw a ball where it was supposed to go, I couldn't learn to swim, and I wouldn't learn to ride a bike, because no matter what anyone told me, I knew I'd fail.

Sometimes my teachers would try to be encouraging. When I couldn't read the words on the board they'd say, "Come on, David, you know that word." Only I didn't. And it was embarrassing. I just felt dumb. And dumb was how the kids treated me. They'd make fun of me every chance they got, asking me to spell "cat" or something like that. Even if I knew how to spell it, I wouldn't; they'd only give me another word. Anyway, it was awful, because more than anything I wanted friends. On my birthday when I blew out the candles I didn't wish I could learn to read; what I wished for was that the kids would like me.

With the bad reports coming from school, and with me moaning about wanting to die and how everybody hated me, my parents began looking for help. That's when the testing started. The school tested me, the child-guidance center tested me, private psychiatrists tested me. Everybody knew something was wrong—especially me.

It didn't help much when they stuck a fancy name onto it. I couldn't pronounce it then—I was only in second grade—and I was ashamed to talk about it. Now it rolls off my tongue, because I've been living with it for a lot of years—dyslexia.

All through elementary school it wasn't easy. I was always having to do things that were "different," things the other kids didn't have to do. I had to go to a child psychiatrist, for instance.

One summer my family forced me to go to a camp for children with reading problems. I hated the idea, but the camp turned out pretty good, and I had a good time. I met a lot of kids who couldn't read and somehow that helped. The director of the camp said I had a higher I.Q. than 90 percent of the population. I didn't believe him.

About the worst thing I had to do in fifth and sixth grade was go to a special education class in another school in our town. A bus picked me up, and I didn't like that at all. The bus also picked up emotionally disturbed kids and retarded kids. It was like going to a school for the retarded. I always worried that someone I knew would see me on that bus. It was a relief to go to the regular junior high school.

Life began to change a little for me then, because I began to feel better about myself. I found the teachers cared; they had meetings about me and I worked harder for them for a while. I began to work on the potter's wheel, making vases and pots that the teachers said were pretty good. Also, I got a letter for being on the track team. I could always run pretty fast.

At high school the teachers are good, and everyone is trying to help me. I've gotten honors some marking periods, and I've won a letter on the cross-country team. Next quarter I think the school might hold a show of

my pottery. I've got some friends. But there are still some embarrassing times. For instance, every time there is writing in the class, I get up and go to the special education room. Kids ask me where I go all the time. Sometimes I say, "to Mars."

Homework is a real problem. During free periods in school I go into the special ed room and staff members read assignments to me. When I get home my mother reads to me. Sometimes she reads an assignment into a tape recorder, and then I go into my room and listen to it. If we have a novel or something like that to read, she reads it out loud to me. Then I sit down with her and we do the assignment. She'll write, while I talk my answers to her. Lately I've taken to dictating into a tape recorder, and then someone—my father, a private tutor, or my mother—types up what I've dictated. Whatever homework I do takes someone else's time, too. That makes me feel bad.

We had a big meeting in school the other day—eight of us, four from the guidance department, my private tutor, my parents, and me. The subject was me. I said I wanted to go to college, and they told me about colleges that have facilities and staff to handle people like me. That's nice to hear.

As for what happens after college, I don't know and I'm worried about that. How can I make a living if I can't read? Who will hire me? How will I fill out the application form? The only thing that gives me any courage is the fact that I've learned about well-known people who couldn't read or had other problems and still made it. Like Albert Einstein, who didn't talk until he was 4 and flunked math. Like Leonardo da Vinci, who everyone seems to think had dyslexia.

I've told this story because maybe some teacher will read it and go easy on a kid in the classroom who has what I've got. Or, maybe some parent will stop nagging his kid, and stop calling him lazy. Maybe he's not lazy or dumb. Maybe he just can't read and doesn't know what's wrong. Maybe he's scared, like I was.

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THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. What is dyslexia? Is it essential for an understanding of the essay that we know more about dyslexia than Raymond tells us? Explain.
2. Before being diagnosed dyslexic, Raymond remembers feeling "dumb" and the other kids treating him as though he were. How intelligent do you think Raymond is? What evidence did you use to arrive at your conclusion? Explain.
3. What does Raymond's story tell us about the importance of our early childhood experiences, especially within our educational system?
4. Raymond uses many colloquial and idiomatic expressions, such as "she came unhinged" and "she got so red in the face I thought she'd blow up" (1). (Glossary: *Colloquial Expression*) Identify other examples of such diction. How do they affect your reaction to the essay?

5. How has Raymond organized his story? (Glossary: *Organization*)
6. Raymond reveals the purpose of his story in the final paragraph. Why do you suppose he did not announce his intention earlier in the essay? (Glossary: *Purpose*)

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

To help teachers recognize students who might be dyslexic, *Dyslexia Teacher* has posted the following list of dyslexia symptoms on its Web site, www.dyslexia-teacher.com:

- a noticeable difference between the pupil's ability and their actual achievement;
- a family history of learning difficulties;
- difficulties with spelling;
- confusion over left and right;
- writing letters or numbers backwards;
- difficulties with math/science;
- difficulties with organizing themselves;
- difficulty following 2- or 3-step instructions.

Spelling gets singled out as one area that is important to look at when diagnosing dyslexia. According to *Dyslexia Teacher*,

Spelling is the activity which causes most difficulty for dyslexic children. The observation of spelling errors in short, simple words is the way in which most dyslexic children first come to our attention. Examples of words which cause particular difficulty are: *any, many, island, said, they, because, enough*, and *friend*.

Other words will sometimes be spelt in the way that you would expect them to be spelt if our spelling system were rational, for example, *does/dus, please/pleeze, knock/nock, search/serch, journey/jerney*, etc.

Dyslexic children also experience difficulties with "jumbled spellings." These are spelling attempts in which all the correct letters are present, but are written in the wrong order. Examples include *dose/dos, freind/friend, siad/said, bule/blue, becuase/because*, and *wores/worse*. "Jumbled spellings" show that the child is experiencing difficulty with visual memory. Nondyslexic children and adults often use their visual memory when trying to remember a difficult spelling: they write down two or three possible versions of the word on a spare piece of paper and see which spelling "looks right." They are relying on their visual memory to help them, but the visual memory of a dyslexic child may not be adequate for this task.

After hearing of the difficulties that dyslexic children and adults experience, are you better able to empathize with David Raymond's experiences? Imagine you are dyslexic and discuss with your class what it would feel like for you to exhibit some or all of the symptoms described.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Using your response to the Writing to Discover prompt for the Raymond selection as a starting point, write an essay about the importance of reading and literacy in your life.
2. Imagine that you are away at school. Recently you were caught in a speed trap—you were going seventy miles per hour in a fifty-mile-per-hour zone—and have just lost your license; you will not be able to drive home this coming weekend, as you had planned. Write two letters in which you explain why you will not be able to go home, one to your parents and the other to your best friend. Your audience is different in each case, so be sure to choose your diction accordingly. Try to imitate Raymond's informal yet serious and sincere tone in one of your letters.